

【연구논문】

## Amistad Africans on the Abolitionist Stage

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The Amistad revolt of 1839 has become widely known to contemporary Americans since Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* was released in December 1997. As indicated by the film trailer's last title, "A True Story," the director aimed at representing the historic slave revolt on screen as realistically as possible.<sup>1)</sup> In fact, many reviewers have considered the film's achievement limited to a history lesson.<sup>2)</sup>

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1) Henry Louis Gates, Jr., listed as a consultant for the film, praises the film for its realistic representations such as the director's decision to use Mende language for the African captive characters. Howard Jones, the author of *Mutiny on the Amistad*, often visited the set during filming to contribute to the film's historical accuracy. See Bruce Newman, "Remember the *Amistad*? The Slave Ship Revolt That History Books Forgot Gets a Spielbergian Chapter," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1997, <http://proquest.umi.com.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/pqdweb?did=11335904&sid=9&Fmt=3&clientId=2256&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

2) As Bill DeLapp has noted, "Amistad attempts to right a historical wrong with this large-scale production of a little-known incidents, but the Africans end up being just footnotes in Spielberg's earnest history lesson." Bill DeLapp, untitled review, All Movie Portal.com website, no date, [http://www.allmovieportal.com/m/1997\\_Amistad36.html](http://www.allmovieportal.com/m/1997_Amistad36.html). Janet Maslin claims that the film's accomplishment would be to secure "its place in history classrooms." Maslin, "Pain of Captivity Made Starkly Real," *The New York Times*, Dec. 10, 1997, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/film/121097amistad-film-review.html>. Stephen Brown also suggests that

Cinematic representation of a historical event unavoidably raises one question: from whose perspective does the film show the past? Film critics often claim that films about slavery are somewhat racist because non-white slaves cannot help but serve as visual objects for antislavery sentiments rather than subjective agents independent of white spectators.<sup>3)</sup> *Amistad* is not unsusceptible to this attack. The director was overly ambitious in his attempt to achieve historical accuracy, since few historical records detailing the Amistad revolt have been preserved and those that have been focus narrowly on white abolitionists rather than Amistad African captives. Despite many efforts--using the Mende language, conducting extensive research on the Amistad case, and casting real Africans--to visualize the past on screen, the completed film remains organized primarily around the principle of commercial entertainment. And it entertains by presenting the Amistad Africans as “exotic other[s], as pure and incomprehensible as his [the director’s] beloved dinosaurs and aliens.”<sup>4)</sup> Not surprisingly, the *London Times* claims that Spielberg’s obsession with Cinque’s naked body turns “history into a black porno flick.”<sup>5)</sup> This attack on *Amistad* reveals one aspect of the complicated racial relationship between blacks as performers and whites as observers.

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the film is “like a stodgy history lesson instead of an explanation of transcendent themes.” Quoted in Julie Roy Jeffrey, “*Amistad* (1997): Steven Spielberg’s ‘True Story,’” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21.1 (2001): 78.

- 3) The film’s writer David Franzoni claims, “Most movies that deal with slavery are unintentionally racist” because white characters weigh “the good fight to liberate the black man.” He emphasizes that Spielberg’s *Amistad*, by contrast, shows how the African captives “would free the Americans.” Quoted in *ibid.*, 81.
- 4) Noel Murray, “Amistad,” *NashvilleScene*, Dec. 22, 1997, <http://www.filmvault.com/filmvault/nash/a/amistad1.html>.
- 5) Quoted in Jeffrey, 78.

The perspective on the Amistad case in this film seemingly comes from the African captives, as the film shows their back stories in Africa and the Middle Passage. Yet the dominant gaze for the Africans' narrative remains skewed to those (including the director) watching the movie. The camera highlights the African captives' shackled, tortured, scarred, bloody, and starving bodies, the raw corporeality of which is intensified for non-Mende speakers by their use of the Mende language.<sup>6)</sup> The powerful image of their corporeality makes a sharp contrast to white American characters' undistinguished bodies, such as the dark-suited Quakers and uniformed law officers. The casting of the film had already portended the racial division among the black and white characters. Spielberg describes his first impression of Djimon Hounsou, who plays the role of Cinque, the leader of the Amistad revolt, with remarks on his well-built body, calling it "a wake-up call" and "overwhelming."<sup>7)</sup> Because Spielberg assumed the actor's compelling physique would make Cinque's heroism more believable, the director encouraged Hounsou to exhibit his black body at the expense of the character's complex inner conflicts. Additionally, other African actors tried to intensify their bodily images by wearing real chains that made them "really [...] get into the moment."<sup>8)</sup> By contrast, Anthony Hopkins, who plays John Quincy Adams, says that he had freedom to create the

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6) The film does not offer subtitles on the African captives' speaking until Lewis Tappan and Theodore Joadson find an interpreter. This cinematic technique stresses the difficulty of communication with the Africans during the actual event.

7) Cliff Rothman, "A Chat with the Film Industry's Big 5," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1998, <http://proquest.umi.com.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/pqdweb?did=27064282&sid=11&Fmt=3&clientId=2256&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

8) "Making of Amistad," *Amistad*, DVD, DreamWorks, 1998.

character on his own because the director did not tell him how to be.<sup>9)</sup> In this cinematic representation of the historical event, the Africans are revived as full-bodied performers, whereas the white characters appear to be so abstract and bodiless that the white actors can use their imagination to invent these characters.

A few film reviewers felt embarrassed at the excessive exposure of the black actors' bodies in *Amistad* because such exposure invites audiences to a theatrical presentation of the black body. At the time of the Amistad revolt, (white) observers' spectatorship of the black body in public places was sanctioned: for estimation in slave auctions, for entertainment in minstrel shows, or to arouse antislavery sentiment in abolitionist circuits. Similarly, the black actors' bodies in *Amistad* primarily become an object of a disembodied audience's spectatorship. Audiences see the objectified black bodies both as expressions of the African captives' humanity (as the director intends), but ultimately also as entertainment. This grammar of racial sentiments--black performer with excessive corporeality and bodiless (white) observer--contradicts the director's intention to illuminate the heroic Africans' victory in antebellum America. The controversy over the film's representation of the Amistad Africans repeats the dilemma of exhibiting a former slave on the abolitionist stage in the vortex of antislavery movements in the U.S.

Until the Civil War, abolitionists centered presentations of former slaves' bodies and their testimonial storytelling on antislavery public meeting programs, which Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls "the Negro

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9) Jeffrey, "True Story," 90.

exhibit.”<sup>10</sup>) Because most Northerners did not experience the realities of the South, they considered the true-to-life stories of black slaves accurate accounts of slavery. The socio-political inscriptions upon a fugitive or former slave’s body could identify the inhumane nature of Southern slavery. Even if a former slave on stage failed to detail personal experiences in the plantation, tree-like scars on the slave’s back proved the unjustifiable cruelties of the Southern institution more effectively than verbal articulation. Accordingly, observers at each antislavery meeting were required, as Carol E. Henderson contends, to interpret the slave’s body within “a framework for formulating a recognizable African American voice situated around the body and its scars.”<sup>11</sup>) More importantly, these meetings offered a site for reciprocal engagement with the cultural and political invention of performative blackness for both the Africans and the Northern observers. The term “performative blackness” explains a particular aspect of black performance in the sense that a black performer theatrically represented the experience of being black while challenging Euro-American notions of racial hierarchy.

The fund-raising meetings for the Amistad Africans after the last trial at the Supreme Court in March 1841 were similar to antislavery

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10) Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Workings of the Spirit* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), 9. There is no record telling exactly when and where abolitionists first hired former slaves as visible evidence of the cruelties of slavery. This theatrical presentation of former slaves’ tortured flesh might not have appeared until abolitionists began to unite for collective actions in the early 1830s. The politically organized movement took its shape in 1833 when William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, and other leading abolitionists established the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia.

11) Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2002), 40.

meetings in their use of black performance. A writer for the *Liberator* comments on one of the fundraising meetings for the Africans' trip to Africa, "All their performances were free from affectation or display of any kind."<sup>12</sup>) Despite the writer's apparent compliment to the Africans' ingenuity, this comment remains somewhat questionable. The observers at the meeting were willing to pay money for the spectacle of these "unusual" black people, and, in response, the Africans would provide the observers with satisfying performances for the Africans' own benefits. If the writer got an impression of the performance "free from affectation," the Africans may have skillfully demonstrated what the writer considered natural to Africans and African descendants rather than any real, "authentic" blackness. While the Amistad Africans repetitively performed the conventional presentation at antislavery meetings led by white abolitionists, the observers were asked to perceive their performance as a "shared experience" with black slaves in the South.

In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott argues that black performance cannot but be "performative." Black Americans "not only exercised a certain amount of control over such [performing] practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators." Lott encapsulates this performativity with the term "self-commodification," which he describes as "a way of getting along in a constricted world."<sup>13</sup>) The Amistad Africans' performance was essential to their survival in the U.S., promoting their "self-commodification" on the abolitionist stage. In the same sense, Judith Butler defines performativity "not as

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12) *Liberator*, Nov. 19, 1841, 4.

13) Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, 39.

a singular or deliberate ‘act’ but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”<sup>14</sup>) Rather than “acting” on the abolitionist stage, the Amistad Africans as well as black Americans demonstrated their bodies as abolitionists prescribed. As a result, the Africans’ theatrical performances shaped their racial identity.

This performative aspect of racial construction does not necessarily indicate that the Africans passively internalized the abolitionists’ demand for a mode of racial identification while repeating a particular performance. In fact, African Americans such as Frederick Douglass understood the discursive potential of the black body on the abolitionist stage, as Baker argues, “[I]t was only through engagement with the public, symbolic order that he [Douglass] would be able to venture statements that would come legitimately to be defined as in/on the slaves’ liberational behalf.”<sup>15</sup>) For this reason, Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked*, a theatrical representation “always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing” because it “produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly.”<sup>16</sup>) This essay neither attempts to recover the voice of the Africans on the abolitionist stage nor asserts their agency against racial inscriptions onto them. Rather, it searches for a clue that, in these “ruptures and gaps,” the Amistad Africans show their subtle yet certain resistance both to abolitionists’ directorship and to observers’ spectatorship of their performance.

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14) Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

15) Baker, *Workings*, 14.

16) Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

White observers and the Amistad African captives were segregated between the outside and inside of a jail cell, between the public gallery and bar table in the courtroom, and between audience and stage at antislavery meetings. For the various observers, who consisted of lay-people, legal professionals, newspaper writers, and abolitionists, regardless of the different degrees and purposes of their spectatorships, the Africans had to performatively display their bodies; these observers wanted to witness blackness or what they believed were the authentic characteristics of blacks in the Africans' performing bodies. In a theatrical setting of being seen by and seeing each other, while the white observers regulated the black performers' bodies through spectatorship of the body, the black performers disrupted such regulation by demonstrating their unruly bodies. The remainder of this essay explores this racial dynamic discovered in the Amistad Africans' performance on the abolitionist stage as an actual and historical site during their residence in the U.S.

American abolitionists fought to eradicate the illegal slave trade in the Atlantic Ocean by defending the fifty-three Amistad Africans against the Spanish slave traders' argues of ownership. With the help of the interpreter James Covey, Lewis Tappan and abolitionists close to him endeavored to provide the "missing" narrative background of the Amistad revolt and the Africans' histories, which had been previously produced to support the cause of the traders. According to the facts disclosed by the abolitionists, the Africans were kidnapped in Mende villages, part of present-day Sierra Leone, then transported on slave ships, where they were disguised as West-Indian native



“ladinos” in Havana and then illegally purchased by Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes.<sup>17)</sup> On the way to Puerto Principe, the Africans, led by Cinque, revolted and ordered the two Spaniards to steer their schooner *La Amistad* back to the shore of Sierra Leone where the Africans had been handed to European slave traders by African kidnapers. However, to get a chance to be aided by the U.S. navy, the Spaniards tricked the rebels by roaming through the Bahamas and up the North American coastline without heading to West Africa.

The Africans’ capture in the U.S. intensified controversies over American slavery and the legality of the slave trade, kindling the public’s curiosity about the original Africans, and igniting abolitionists’ desire to help the Amistad captives in order to pave the way to a slave-free America. In the courts, young ambitious lawyer Rodger Baldwin and ex-President John Quincy Adams—who joined as a result of Tappan’s tenacious persuasion—disputed the legal issues on behalf of the captives. Outside the courtroom, the abolitionists organized by Tappan quickly moved to gather the committee of the Amistad case,<sup>18)</sup> and Rev. Joshua Leavitt published his report on the African captives in the New York *Commercial Advertiser*. After three trials and some two years in jail, the Mende Africans were successfully released.<sup>19)</sup>

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17) The U.S. government banned the importation of slaves from Africa in 1808 and permitted only intra-national trades. But, even by 1839, smuggling Africans into the U.S. continued, as the Amistad case proves. Through the illegal slave trade over Africa and Americas, about 50,000 slaves allegedly regarded as “captured runaways” or “ladinos” were transported into the U.S. between 1807 and 1860. Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 615.

18) A committee was appointed, consisting of Simeon S. Joselyn, Joshua Leavitt, and Lewis Tappan. New York newspapers published an “Appeal to the Friends of Liberty” written by the newly formed Amistad Committee. Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano* (Durham: Duke UP, 1977), 84-96.

Despite their victory at the final trial in 1841, this legal achievement was not a dramatic turning point for American abolitionism. The court decision did not affect the trade in slave states, but was limited to reaffirming the illegitimacy of transatlantic slave trades. American abolitionists nonetheless took the trials as a chance to direct the broader public's attention to antislavery movements.

When still jailed, the Amistad Africans were already very popular in the North, even to those who may not have supported abolitionism. As soon as the African captives' arrived at Hartford for the trials, more than three thousand people came to see them for the first three days, paying twelve and half a cents apiece to jail keepers.<sup>20</sup> Theater producers and abolitionists in Northern cities did not overlook

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- 19) This essay does not discuss the specific procedure of the legal cases against the Amistad captives. However, given that the court scene in which the lawyers and attorneys fiercely argued is quite theatrical, this is not unrelated to the topic of performance because the scene exemplifies a symbolic stage setting and its participants displayed their affected gestures. For instance, when Baldwin attacked the forged files on the Africans' enslavement with rational and legal language, Ruiz and Montes attempted to retrieve their rebellious "properties" by appealing to the American prosecutors with pretentious tears and laments. It disgusted Adams as he asked the audiences: "Who, then, are the tyrants and oppressors against whom our laws are invoked? Who are the innocent sufferers, for whom we are called upon to protect this ship against enemies and robbers?" John Quincy Adams, *Argument of John Quincy Adams before the Supreme Court of the United States* (New York, 1841), 21. For the historical and political context of the Amistad case, see Christopher Martin, *The Amistad Affair* (New York: Aberlard-Schuman, 1970), Iyunolu Folayan Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2000), Thomas, *The Slavery Trade*, and Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*.
- 20) Regarding this popularity of the Amistad captives, Lewis Tappan argued that many Americans were anxious to "acquaint themselves with the African character, as developed before the natives have been corrupted by intercourse with the white man." *Emancipator*, Oct. 10, 1839, 6.

the public's desire to see the Africans, and quickly utilized this for their commercial or abolitionist purposes. For example, the Amistad mutiny was dramatized first at the Bowery Theater of New York in a play titled *The Black Schooner, or, The Pirate Slaver Amistad*. The play was commercially successful, earning over \$1,650 for two weeks, whereas most of staged plays at that time ran only one or two days.<sup>21)</sup> Just two weeks after the play's opening, the *New York Mirror* predicted that the drama would be a success in the 1839 season.<sup>22)</sup> Various local theaters also attracted curious audiences by presenting their own theatrical versions of the Amistad revolt. The cost for the legal defense of the African captives, approximately \$5,000, was made up through these theater productions.<sup>23)</sup> In addition, wax duplicates of the African captives were exhibited at the Peale's Museum in New York City for several weeks.<sup>24)</sup> The popularity of the Amistad Africans encouraged abolitionists to visually publicize the Africans as the victims of slavery and the evidence of the black race's humanity.

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21) Martin, *Amistad*, 177.

22) Heather S. Nathan, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2009), 187.

23) Roy E. Finkenbine, "The Symbolism of Slave Mutiny: Black Abolitionist Responses to the Amistad and Creole Incidents," in *Rebellion, Repression, Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jane Hathaway (Westport: Praeger, 2001), 239.

24) One black writer's observation of the wax duplicates illustrates that black Americans also had an intense interest in the Amistad Africans: "We last week visited the Amistad captives; not the great originals, reader, but their counterfeits, done in wax. They are exhibited at Peale's Museum, and well worthy [*sic*] a visit. The figures are 29 in number, of life size, and they possess a fidelity to nature which is truly astonishing." *Colored American*, June 27, 1840, 9.

The Africans presumably also noticed the black body's theatrical productivity. The popularity of the African captives indicated antebellum Americans' voyeuristic desire to see the Africans, while the visible corporeality of the Africans' bodies was emphasized by their unintelligible language and physical imprisonment. The observers' curious gaze at the Africans initiated the Africans' mutual recognition of the observers' presence and even of their own bodies through the observers' gaze. Because the profits from the observers' visits to jail were spent on these Africans' comforts, the former's curiosity turned into something beneficial to the latter. Therefore, the Africans understood the exchange value of their physical presence in the foreign country. The self-control over their bodies might be essential to good relationships with jail keepers and visitors, resulting in more comforts for the Africans. The theatrical and exhibitiv setting of the jail already required the Africans to present their bodies in particular ways for their own survival, even before they as free men stood on the abolitionist stage. Later the Amistad Africans were publicly staged at antislavery meetings, through which Tappan's abolitionists raised funds for the Africans' education to be missionaries and trip back to Africa.

The racial reciprocity between the Africans and the observers epitomizes the racial dynamics of American antislavery movements. On the one hand, most likely white Northerners of the antebellum period had conflicted feelings toward the Amistad Africans. The Africans appeared to be heroic but dangerous, noble but uncivilized, and familiar but unassimilable.<sup>25)</sup> These Americans as observers

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25) George Fredrickson argues that white intellectuals in the 1840s and 1850s began to convey contradictory stereotypes of (enslaved) blacks. Despite the unchanged

wanted to see qualities such as republican heroism along side stereotypical notions of the black race consistent with maintaining white Americans' control over blacks. On the other hand, the Amistad Africans reacted to the curious yet controlling observers' gaze at them, by apparently performing what the observers wanted to see on the abolitionist stage, and by covertly expressing their resistance to the observers' spectatorial authority through their bodily movements. Regarding this mutual formation of race in the U.S., Dana Nelson notes, "'race' has never been a fixed concept," but "the idea of 'race' had to be invented, described, promulgated, and legislated by those who would benefit as a group from the concept."<sup>26</sup> While recognizing each other, the African performers and the Northern-white observers together restlessly shaped and reshaped meanings of blackness in antebellum America.

The white-black dynamics facilitated commemoration of slavery and led both black and white Americans to expect the multiracial future, as the Amistad Africans' performance on the abolitionist stage continued on. In *Traumatic Possessions*, Jennifer Griffiths argues that slave testimony offers a "public enactment of memory": "When looking at the reception of testimony within specific contexts, one must also consider cultural inscriptions of identity onto the [black] body. How we mark different [enslaved] bodies is linked to the

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belief in racial differences maintaining white-black hierarchy, a few white Northerners "discovered redeeming virtues and even evidences of black superiority" on religion and docility. Frederickson calls this tendency the "romantic racialism." Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1987), 101-102.

26) Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), viii-ix.

transmission and reception of memory and testimony.”<sup>27)</sup> The Amistad Africans were brought onto the abolitionist stage to perform their sufferings from the history of African people’s enslavement and the Middle Passage. While emotionally responding to their performance, the observers could expand the scope of American historiography. Geographically, the U.S. appeared to be a part of the transatlantic history of the colonization and enslavement of Africa. And, demographically, the observers saw their black others together participating in this history, although Africans and their enslaved descendants had been silent and invisible in mainstream American history. Therefore, the black (ex)slave’s body-as-text<sup>28)</sup> on display was designed to function as a site where the observers could historicize the former slave’s memory and identify themselves as political subjects against slavery. This essay calls this commemoration of slavery through the black body’s “performative historiography.” Because it was impossible for various observers to see the performing /performative black body free from their own desires, the body inevitably became the blueprint of what observers expected from their black contemporaries. Here is the reason that (ex)slaves’ performance went further than the collective memorization of American slavery.

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27) Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2009), 5.

28) Henderson argues that “the body has functioned as a walking text, a fleshy reminder of the paradoxical nature of an American citizenry built around the ideology of difference” throughout American history. The body has been used by “various ethnic groups as a tool to challenge the stifling conditions of economic and social oppression or, at the very least, to challenge our understanding of those historical moments that revolve around the issue of social and political control of subjugated groups.” Henderson, *Scarring*, 3.

Performative historiography accompanied such visions of the post-slavery era. Black (ex)slaves' performance and the theatrical setting at antislavery meetings made both the performers and the observers envision the historic ideals of citizenry necessary for a racially equal society in the future.

The pattern of the fundraising program for the Amistad Africans illustrates how the antislavery performance generated performative historiography and anticipated the future. The program consisted of two parts: looking back to the Africans' past and looking forward to their future. Typically, the performance started with a pastor's opening prayer, and, then, Lewis Tappan or the Africans' white teachers gave introductory greetings to audiences. The Africans, accordingly, began to be called one by one to stand on stage, when a white moderator summarized each African's personal history from birth to enslavement. Cinque, as a highlight of the performance, always showed up last on the center of stage. The Africans' re-presentation of the Amistad revolt on stage ritualized re(-)membering the historical event, and the observers participated in this ritual. After performing their recollection of the dramatically successful rebellion on the schooner *La Amistad*, these Africans read loudly in the Bible wherever the observer asked them to, spelled English words, answered questions on Christianity, and sang their native songs as well as hymns in English for the finale. What the observers discovered might be the Africans' capability of internalizing republican values of revolution and Christianity as universal civic virtue<sup>29</sup>) for

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29) Ronald Takaki explains that during the Revolution period, Christian moral asceticism and republicanism were blended. Takaki, *Iron Cages* (New York:

the upcoming time after their emancipation. Enthusiastic cheers and generous donations from the observers followed, as if their spontaneous reactions to the Africans' performances were parts of the program.<sup>30)</sup>

The particular three groups—the (white) abolitionists led by Tappan, the (white) observers, and the African performers—actively engaged in the Amistad fundraising meetings. The abolitionists designed the Africans' performance to incorporate their revolt into the narrative of the American Revolution and to glorify the heroic Africans as if they were descendants of the Founding Fathers, while taming the Africans by associating them with the Protestant ethic. Yet the observers stereotyped the Africans through preexisting images of black slaves, for instance, as insurgents with threatening physical images or a happy Sambo with his entertaining bodily performance. Resisting these two groups' spectatorship, the Amistad Africans performed their unfixable bodies in ways that we cannot but trace only through the white writers' observations of the fund-raising meetings for these Africans.

The abolitionists attempted to create images agreeable to abolitionist visions by framing the Amistad Africans in terms of Western heroism. According to the abolitionist invention on behalf of the Africans, the Amistad case was intended to reframe black insurgency as a praiseworthy revolution. Maggie Montesinos Sale argues that these abolitionists' use of the trope of revolutionary struggle “disrupted both the original alliance of ‘all [free] men’ and the alliance of ‘all [white] men’ solidified in the 1830s, and claimed the discourse for

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Oxford UP, 2000), 4.

30) The program is specifically introduced in the *Colored American*, May 8, 1841, 1.



an alliance of ‘all men.’”<sup>31)</sup> However, this new discourse for the alliance of “all men” was possible in the extended alliance of “all free and white men.”<sup>32)</sup> For example, Joshua Leavitt extols Cinque as “the daring leader of this band of captives, [who] is a hero, worthy to stand by the side of the noblest Roman, whose name ever graced the pages of history.”<sup>33)</sup> Similarly, a writer with the acronym J. C. G. idolizes Cinque: “Unquestionably the Congolese<sup>34)</sup> chieftain has, from his heart of hearts, recognized this sentiment of Lord Byron, and his practical application of it has been an exact copy of our own conduct, to resist unto death, aggression, insult, and an infamous tyranny.”<sup>35)</sup> The black revolutionary leader had the boldness of “the noblest Roman” and the sentiment of “Lord Byron,” mirroring the white men’s “own conduct.” Undoubtedly, most antebellum Americans did not know Africa and its people aside from the fact that Africa was colonized as a source of human labor and natural materials. The abolitionists believed that these Americans could easily understand the Africans’ heroic achievement within the historical and cultural frame of Euro-America. In the abolitionists’ minds, the Amistad Africans’ virtue could be conceivable only when covered with whiteness.

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31) Sale, *Volcano*, 63.

32) In the U.S. territory any black violence was characterized by pro-slavery Americans an insurgency of “the unfit, the unruly, the untamed, against the better government of a civilized people.” See Sale, *Volcano*, 8-9.

33) *Liberator*, Sept. 13, 1839, 1.

34) Cinque came from the British Colony of Sierra Leone. The Kingdom of Congo (now part of Angola, Republic of the Congo, and Democratic Republic of the Congo), which the writer believed was Cinque’s native land, was located far south of Sierra Leone. The writer’s confusion about Cinque’s origin hints at contemporary Americans’ general ignorance of Africa.

35) *Ibid.*, 2.

In addition to using the rhetoric of Western heroism to publicize the Amistad revolt, the abolitionists employed Protestant ideals to describe the Africans' future. The Amistad Africans on stage were not "heathenish" foreigners any more but "civilized" Christians. They were taught by white pastors and abolitionists to demonstrate religious faith, literacy, and the potential to proceed with missionary work in the near future. Whatever observers asked them to read in the Bible, the Africans, usually Kinna who learned English more quickly than any other Amistad African, recited it in English and assured auditors of their holy mission in the African homeland. The Cleveland *Daily Herald* describes one of the Amistad meetings held between November 5 and 17, 1841.<sup>36)</sup> Nine men and one girl among the Africans performed at this tour, accompanied by Lewis Tappan and William Raymond, their teacher. The newspaper comments that the observers were "surprised and delighted to witness their [the Africans'] extraordinary improvement," and willingly donated money for their trip back to Africa.<sup>37)</sup> Although the article does not mention clearly the reason for the observers' extraordinary generosity, the tone of this description insinuates that the writer himself had not expected the Africans' intellectual improvement. As Ronald Takaki maintains, many white Northerners did not see blacks as able to develop beyond childhood. Stereotypes of black childhood were associated with the notions of black intellectual inferiority that white-male leaders like

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36) During the thirteen days, the Africans performed at sixteen meetings in several Northern cities including Boston, Haverhill, Lowell, Nashua, Andover, Springfield, Northampton, Hartford, and Farmington. But the article does not clarify in what city the writer saw the Amistad Africans.

37) *Daily Herald*, Dec. 30, 1841, 2.

Thomas Jefferson had asserted.<sup>38)</sup> The Africans' "extraordinary improvement" as a case-study suggested that even pure Africans could be "elevated" near to the "advanced" white race through "enlightenment" education.

To learn Christianity meant not only to become civilized but also to internalize normative civic virtue. Specific types of citizens' interiority, as Christopher Castiglia argues, represent Americans' understanding of "race" and social identities.<sup>39)</sup> White abolitionists regarded black Americans "first as pupils needing lessons in, and then as stable embodiments of, civic 'character,'" sympathetic affect of which "entitled white abolitionists to teach, challenge, and change."<sup>40)</sup> Tappan designed the Africans' performance to prove this civic interiority before the white observers who might be reluctant to accept black people as citizens equal to themselves in the U.S. By emphasizing the Africans' gentleness and generosity through Christian education, Tappan and other abolitionists supposed that the Amistad Africans' civic interiority would suggest black people's eligibility to constitute the U.S. citizenry with white Americans. At the same meeting above, one minister asked Kinna what he would do for "his enemies."<sup>41)</sup> Even though the article does not indicate who these enemies were, they might be African kidnapers, the Spanish slave traders, legal participants on behalf of the Spaniards, or white Americans in general. Kinna answered, "O, we pray for *them* too. I think, if you look into the Bible same time, you'll find it say, bless your enemies and do them good, and if he be hungry give him to eat."<sup>42)</sup> The performance

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38) Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 113.

39) Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 101.

40) *Ibid.*, 103.

41) Cleveland *Daily Herald*, Dec. 30, 1841, 2.

suggested that black Americans like these Africans must be grateful and generous enough not to cause any social unrest. The abolitionists believed that, in witnessing Kinna's response, the observers' anxiety about black insurgency might be lessened.

The Amistad Africans' performance certainly generated "positive" images of the black race in the observers' minds. Following the abolitionists' elaborate design, the Amistad Africans' performance helped observers imagine a new, racially diverse America. The New York *Herald* sketches one black family among many white ones at the Tabernacle meeting for the Amistad Africans on May 12, 1841:

There were blacks and whites, and every intermediate hue and color, beautifully interspersed all over the house. On one seat was a negro fellow, as black as the ace of spades, with a mulatto wife, and a couple of children, a shade whiter than the mother, and next to them, well dressed white ladies and gentlemen, all mingling together, regardless of the odor exhaled by their neighbors, and happy to receive their colored brethren and sisters on terms of perfect equality.<sup>43)</sup>

The writer sees "every intermediate hue and color" in the image of blacks and whites "beautifully" "mingling" together at the hall. The white writer's glorification of this interracial placement at the antislavery meeting sounds too positive to incorporate any reminder of slavery in the South or racism in the North that the multiracial observers might be experiencing. The "mulatto" mother's "white" blood transformed her children so that they were "whiter" and could

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42) *Ibid.*, 2. Italics original.

43) New York *Herald*, May 13, 1841, 1.

be “received” by “white” Americans. The white people were tolerant of the black family’s “odor” and willingly accepted the family “on terms of perfect equality.” While the writer makes the multiracial observers more palatable to white readers through such language, the tragic history of miscegenation under slavery is erased in the mother’s “mulatto” body and her “whiter” children. Given that white slaveholders’ sexual exploitation of black (female) slaves was commonly introduced as an immoral effect of slavery at other antislavery meetings, the romantic depiction of the beauty of racial diversity is anachronistic. Because of the writer’s obvious ignorance or neglect of racial reality, the phrase “perfect equality” does not seem to be persuasive. Nevertheless, the writer’s blind optimism illustrates that the Amistad Africans’ performance led some observers to imagine a multiracial America in the future. The black and white observers physically sat together and watched the African revolutionary heroes’ testimony and performance on the history of the Middle Passage and the mutiny at sea. In the writer’s mind, this visual image would ideally suggest the possibility of racial equality represented by all races “beautifully interspersed all over” the nation.

These abolitionists’ invention of the “model” black man for their stage did not entirely govern both the observers’ perception of the Africans and the Africans’ performance for the observers. Rather, because the Africans were paradoxically powerful, persistent, and troubling to antebellum Americans, their presence on stage led the observers to confront their own fears of the Africans’ overwhelming power, as embodied in the Africans’ corporeality. The white observers attempted to

affirm their controlling power over the Amistad Africans by often intervening in the Africans' performance. These observers' responses to the performance reveal the limitation of the white, Protestant values on the basis of which the abolitionists struggled to historicize African heroes and to invent the future vision of a multiracial America.

Before the abolitionists started the image-making project on the Amistad Africans, the Africans in the jail had already appeared to be threatening black bodies to many observers' eyes. The *New London Gazette* reports a contributor's observation of them on August 28, 1839: "[W]e also saw Cinque, the master spirit of this bloody tragedy, [...]. His countenance, for a native African, is unusually intelligent, evincing uncommon decision and coolness."<sup>44</sup>) However, this comment is more complex than its apparent awe of Cinque's physique. Cinque's bodily image disturbed the white contributor, causing his anxiety about "savage" slaves' insurrection: "[T]he most horrible creature we ever saw in human shape, an object of terror to the very blacks, who said that he is a cannibal. His teeth projected at almost right angles from his mouth, while his eyes had a most savage and demonic expression."<sup>45</sup>) If this horrified reaction was prevalent, the crowds at the theaters presenting the Amistad revolt and in the museum exhibiting the life-sized wax duplicates of the Africans might not be entirely sympathetic to the abolitionist propaganda on behalf of the Africans.

Northern and mainly white Americans' fascination with the native Africans' fleshy bodies also entailed these Americans' fear of failure

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44) *New London Gazette*, Aug. 28, 1839, 1.

45) *Ibid.*, 1.

to regulate (enslaved) blacks. The worst scenario of this failure, which antebellum Americans imagined, would be the extinction of the white race. For instance, regarding the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy of 1822, one South Carolina man exclaimed that blacks were “barbarians who would, *if they could*, become the *destroyers* of our race.”<sup>46)</sup> As Takaki argues, to prevent potential Nat Turners, white Americans of that time needed a symbol or image that could assure that blacks were controlled.<sup>47)</sup> In this sense, the Amistad Africans were used as such a racial symbol. The wax duplicates--realistic but lifeless--of the Amistad Africans were symptomatic of racial tensions within antislavery movements in the North. The images of the Africans were produced to be displayable commodities: “We have never seen the originals, but have understood that they [the wax duplicates] are *perfect likenesses*: every muscle, every lineament of countenance is portrayed with all the appearance of life. They are to be *removed* next week [...].”<sup>48)</sup> At the wax museums, the observers symbolically placed the unruly Africans’ bodies under their surveillance and control. Then the observers attempted to overcome their own anxiety about a slave insurrection, the emancipation of black slaves, and how consequent racial interfusion might threaten white racial “wholeness.”

The need for this racial symbol became evident when the Amistad Africans performed at the meetings. Regardless of the abolitionists’ investment of republican heroism into the Africans, some observers

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46) Quoted in Takaki, *Cages*, 121

47) *Ibid.*, 121.

48) *Colored American*, June 27, 1840, 1. Emphasis added.

expected to see the stereotype of “happy slave” from the black others. To these observers, the Africans were at best entertaining bodies that recalled the “pickaninnies” or Sambos of minstrel shows and slave auctions. These two fixed images, which are imagined versions of the black other, served control over blacks. The New York *Herald* speculates on the Amistad Africans’ presentation: “The exhibition was very satisfactory, but if the performances had been diversified with a few summersets<sup>49)</sup> [*sic*], in which the negroes are very skillful, the entertainments would have been more complete, and more agreeable to the audience.”<sup>50)</sup> The article refers to the Africans’ presentation using three different terms that are not exactly synonymous. According to the description, what the Africans actually presented was mere “exhibition,” whereby the writer implies that they only displayed themselves rather than developing it as a “performance” created via skillful tactics. The quote stresses that the “performance” even could have “entertained” the (white) audiences who had expected to see the kind of essential blackness that featured in so many white discourses on black difference and inferiority. In the writer’s mind, the fundraising meeting should be the “entertainments” intended to please the audience. He postulates that Africans and their descendants were good at physical (as opposed to verbal, or an otherwise more intellectually generated) performance and tricks. Although the performance could have been “more complete, and more agreeable to the audience,” the writer patronizingly

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49) This is a typo of “somerset” or “somersault” that is a whole body’s overturn performed by an acrobat or tumbler.

50) New York *Herald*, May 13, 1841, 3.



regarded “the exhibition” as still “satisfactory.” Disappointing these audiences, the actual performance lacked the instant recognizability provided by black stereotypes. The article reveals the observer’s desire to label the Africans as nothing more than entertainers for whites’ amusement. This desire derived from the way that abolitionists advertised the universal human right to freedom by staging the Amistad Africans as the victims of the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

It remains unclear what the Amistad Africans actually felt about the abolitionists and the observers when the Africans faced antebellum Americans’ self-contradictory attitudes towards them—revolutionary heroes to be praised, childish savages to be educated, duplicable commodities to be consumed, dangerous cannibals to be subdued, and happy Sambos to be enjoyed. Since they did not leave enough written text to express their personal views on these Americans,<sup>51)</sup> we can only speculate as to their reactions from the observers’ records of the performance. The Africans had to perform according to the abolitionists’ plan to lure more observers, so their performance was more theatrical for the pleasure of the observers than authentic to the Africans’ sense of their own identities. The same article in the Cleveland *Daily Herald* depicts the beginning of Cinque’s speech:

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51) The letter from Ka-le (or Ka-li) to John Quincy Adams is the only one document written by the Africans. The letter was sent to Adams on the eve of the Supreme Court hearings on January 4, 1841. Here is a part of the letter: “Some [American] men say Mendi people very happy because they laugh and have plenty to eat. Mr. Pendleton [the jail keeper] come, and Mendi people all look sorry because they think about Mendi land friends we no see now. Mr. Pendleton say Mendi people angry; white men afraid of Mendi people. [...] Dear friend, we want you to know how we feel. Mendi people *think, think, think*. Nobody know what he think; [...] Mendi people have got souls.” Quoted in the *Colored American*, March 27, 1841, 5.

“Cinque rose and addressed the assembly in his native tongue, with power and effect.” Despite the observers’ lack of knowledge of his native language, they felt his power “to sway the minds of man and to touch [...] the finer chords of the human heart.” At last, when he expressed “his deep sense of obligation to the ‘Merica people for their kindness,” some of the observers were moved “to tears.”<sup>52)</sup> Given that the observers could not understand Cinque’s words, their overflowing emotions and corporeal reactions suggest that they must have already known what kind of message to receive from the meeting.<sup>53)</sup> As much as the tears blurred their vision to the real Cinque, only the created identity for the heroic and grateful Cinque remained on stage.

One keen observer did not miss such theatricality at the meeting. Lydia Maria Child<sup>54)</sup> attended one of the Africans’ farewell meetings,

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52) Cleveland *Daily Herald*, Dec. 30, 1841, 1.

53) In contrast to his expressive bodily gestures, Cinque’s speech was often misinterpreted and colored by other abolitionists’ mediatory interruptions. For instance, the New London *Gazette* reports on Cinque’s speech right after the Amistad African captives were sent to jail: “My brothers, I am once more among you, having deceived the enemy of our race by saying I had doubloons. I came to tell you that you have only one chance for death, and more for liberty.” Quoted in the *Liberator*, Sept. 6, 1839, 2. The cabin slave boy of *La Amistad*, Antonio, translated Cinque’s “Congolese” into Spanish, and the editor of the newspaper, John Joy Hyde translated this into English. However, later it turned out that Antonio could not speak any African languages. *Emancipator*, Nov. 7, 1839, 2-3. See also Sale, *Volcano*, 78.

54) Lydia Maria Child is one of the most important abolitionists not only because she expansively viewed the maladies of slavery in the Northern context of the labor market system and racism, but also because she offered a feminist critique of male-dominant antislavery movements. In 1841 Child became the first female editor of an antislavery newspaper, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.

making a remark: “I thought these honest creatures would be vexatious materials, should any theological drill-sargent [*sic*] try to substitute a routine of catechisms and creeds for the [individual’s?] life.”<sup>55</sup>) Child was amazed at Kinna’s answers to theological questions not to mention his literacy. However, what surprised her was not his skills but the bifurcation of his psyche into his native culture and Christian education. According to her observation of the Africans, they “would be vexatious materials” because their “drill-sergeant” teachers forcibly made them deny routines and creeds in their native life by implanting theological ideas in their minds.

Child’s observation of the Amistad Africans hints at their subtle but significant resistance to the observers’ controlling gaze. As mentioned above, the repetitiousness of the Africans’ performance was crucial to the commemoration of the event; however, performance on stage is a temporal form of artistic representation, different from a written text perpetuated on paper. In spite of the similarly repetitious contents of the performance, the Africans could not present the exact same performance for each meeting: its routine repetition occasionally allowed the performers to display improvisations. The *New England Weekly Review* complains that their performance was not thoroughly prepared: the reporter witnessed the meeting leader and the Africans mistakenly reciting the “Lord’s Prayer.” They said that the will of

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Regarding the Amistad Africans’ performance, she discovers what white-male writers have overlooked, which suggests her particular perspective on slavery and abolitionism. See Sánchez-Eppler’s *Touching Liberty*, the first chapter titled “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition” (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), 14-49.

55) *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Dec. 2, 1841, 2.

God “to be done in *Heaven* as the *earth*” instead of “to be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In doing so, they were “reversing the order of the Divine instructions and economy.”<sup>56)</sup> The writer detects the Africans’ subversive profanity as something that could reverse the divine order of Christianity. Although the misplacement of the two words seems like a simple mistake, the writer’s emphasis on the reversal implies that the Africans’ verbal aberration is cataclysmic to social hierarchies represented by the heaven-earth dualism, for instance, white-black, Christian-heathen, civilization-barbarism, master-slave, and literacy-illiteracy. The *Weekly Review* writer reacts sensitively to the Africans’ mistake, revealing his own identity construction based on the black other, which Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explain as “psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level.”<sup>57)</sup> To the apprehensive observer, the Amistad Africans’ performance even with a trivial mistake appears to be disruptive to these hierarchies in which the construction of white subjectivity is possible.

The façade of their performance slightly marred by the aberrant mistake attests that the Africans did not successfully fulfill their role for the abolitionists’ project of manufacturing a model of the black race. Instead of playing for the various demands from those consisting of both the abolitionists and audiences, the Africans exhibited their performative bodies that theatrically slipped out of the two groups’ spectatorial control over the bodies. To highlight this

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56) New England *Weekly Review*, Nov. 20, 1841, 4. Italics original.

57) Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986), 5.

slippage as a token of the Amistad Africans' resistance to these officious American sympathizers, we need to go back to Kinna's answer to the minister's question of what he would do to his enemy. Although Kinna seemed to satisfy the observers, in a circumlocutory manner he evaded the minister's aim to ascertain Kinna's understanding of Christian forgiveness and generosity. As a matter of fact, he did not say that he and his people would bless their enemies, but replaced the questioned himself with an abstract and disembodied subject "you" by suggesting a condition: "if you look into the Bible."<sup>58</sup>) In Kinna's answer, he was not a subject for forgiveness but a witness to how his observers--the white other--practiced religious faith according to the Bible. Moreover, the *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier* does not depict Kinna as a religious boy with a compliant nature at all. As his teacher, Mr. Booth, describes, Kinna often challenged his authority as teacher: "Mr. Booth, you say when we all learns to read the Bible we shall go home; [...] and there is such and such an one, naming another, he no learn in two winters, his head be white; if we wait till he learn to read the Bible, we never go home."<sup>59</sup>) Instead of helping his people learn English and Christianity better, Kinna pushed his teacher to give up teaching those who could not follow it till their "head be white." By proclaiming a few Africans' incapability of learning, Kinna discouraged both the abolitionists who advertised them as an exemplar of black Americans, and the observers who came to see how far the "exemplars" could acquaint themselves with the white and Protestant variety.

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58) *Cleveland Daily Herald*, Dec. 30, 1841, 2.

59) *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier*, May 29, 1841, 4.

As well as Kinna, Fuli, one of the Africans, refused to straightforwardly answer Mr. Booth's question by making the observers self-reflexively consider the Africans' feelings toward his contemporary Americans. When the teacher asked, "Fuli, supposed the American people do not help you to get home—how will you get home?," Fuli replied: "I know; I no tell you, [...] American people not all good; good and bad every where; so in Mendi, so here. I no tell you about New Haven; you know all about that."<sup>60</sup> Fuli seemingly failed to answer the teacher's question because he did not mention what he knew or how he would return to Africa. However, his reluctance to directly answer kept the observers wondering about what and why he did not want to tell. His assertion, "you know all about that," urged the observers to self-referentially examine themselves to figure out the elusive reference of "all about that." To understand the Amistad Africans, the observers should be their own observers first ("so in America, so there"), just as Fuli realized that "good and bad every where" by looking back on his native country ("so in Mendi, so here").

In addition to the two Africans' slippery performance on stage, Cinque can serve as a good example of the black body that exhibits resistance to white spectatorship. Without losing the observers' intense attention to his performance, Cinque nonetheless estranged them by delivering a speech in his native language. Though the writer for the Cleveland *Daily Herald* (quoted above) admired the expressiveness of Cinque's body as something that transcended the linguistic barrier, other observers might admit that Cinque remained incomprehensible.

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60) *Ibid.*, 4.

The New England *Weekly Review* phonologically transcribes Cinque's speech, for instance, "cam lo dur tumhad eakoni yarn fumrigostan houn [...]."61) The article even does not attempt to interpret Cinque's narrative by turning to the explanations of those who instructed Cinque. As if eluding any imposition of the various images--murderer, savage, hero, and converted sinner--to the African leader, Cinque looked too alien to embody any image that the (white) observers had projected onto him. For instance, Cinque's masculine black body was hardly associated with the common stereotype of the black man as "rapist" in this article. Instead of being "a little disturbed by the presence of such a host of beautiful ladies," the African leader was sitting calm on the stage till his turn to speak. In fact, the description of Cinque's equilibrium reveals the writer's own sexual gaze at the "beautiful [white] ladies," while he fails to detect black men's sexual desire for white women in Cinque. More radically, Cinque himself looked like "an attentive observer of 'men and things.'"62) Cinque turned the observers' gaze back upon themselves, just as the writer unconsciously exposed his lustful gaze at the women through Cinque's observant gaze at him.63)

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61) It is impossible to prove how exactly the writer transcribes Cinque's native language. However, in the period when Africa was considered to have had no civilization, the writer's attention to Cinque's language is notable. His article exemplifies this language as the evidence of Cinque's dignity and intelligence, which, as the writer explains in the same article, could "revolutionize and civilize a large portion of benighted Africa." *New England Weekly Review*, Nov. 20, 1841, 4.

62) *Ibid.*, 4.

63) Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks explains this gaze at the racial other through Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to her, "[r]acial visibility is related to an unconscious anxiety about the historicity of Whiteness" that "produces a logic of differential

The frustration of the observers' spectatorship became obvious, when they saw Cinque and the Africans apparently enjoying their own performance while making the observers uncomfortable with their inscrutable Africanness. The Pennsylvania *Inquirer and Daily Courier* depicts one farewell meeting for the Amistad Africans. The newspaper portrays Cinque's performance in an attentive manner:

Cinque is so energetic in action, that at the meeting on Monday evening, it was thought prudent to remove the pitchers and tumblers that were on a table before him, lest he should sweep them off. At Mr. Reed's Church, he had full space; he commenced his speech with a restrained action of the right arm, which moved from his elbow downwards, and increased in frequency and rapidity as he progressed, till at length his whole frame was excited; he moved quickly from side to side—now addressing the audience, and now appealing to his countrymen, who would answer his appeals with a low guttural exclamation. He showed the manner in which he knocked off the chains; and when he described the onset on board the Amistad, he was almost terrific.<sup>64</sup>

In this passage, Cinque is neither a grateful African hero nor a

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relations." Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 2000), 20-21. This anxiety entails a desire for active looking at the other to protect the system of racial difference. The evidence of an observer's visual perception is mainly "caused by an unrecognized and underlying need to encounter that which Lacan terms 'the gaze, [...] which always escapes the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with imagining itself as consciousness.'" Ibid., 59. By gazing at Cinque, the writer attempts to promote the fantasy of disembodied white-male spectatorship. However, his spectatorship necessitates Cinque's distinctive presence, which causes the observer's anxiety about fragile "Whiteness." When Cinque returns his gaze back, the writer sustains his status of *seeing* by moving his gaze from at the racial other to at the sexual other, "the beautiful ladies."

64) Pennsylvania *Inquirer and Daily Courier*, May 29, 1841, 5.



touching orator. Rather, he appears to be overwhelmingly corporeal, as the writer seems to be obsessed with the African's body. Cinque here visualized himself not "in speech" but "in action." In describing the concern felt by the organizers of the event ("it was thought prudent [by the organizers] to remove"), the writer has already imagined that the performer would "sweep off" pitchers and tumblers placed on stage. This insinuates that Cinque's corporeality powerfully aroused the writer's vivid imagination, which preceded Cinque's actual performance. Approving of the organizers' removal of the props, the writer does not hide his desire to see how Cinque had "full space" with his exuberant bodily energy. Even during Cinque's speech, the writer continued to focus not on the speech but on Cinque's motions, noticing Cinque "with a restrained action of the right arm." The African performer stopped restraining his bodily expression but intensified aggressive gestures, as his speech "increased in frequency and rapidity" and he "moved quickly from side to side." The observer-writer then witnessed how "[Cinque's] whole [physical] frame was excited." This excitement is to some degree shared by the writer because his observant and breathless-sounding descriptions of Cinque's performance expose the writer's own enthusiasm as well.

However, according to this passage, Cinque did not respond enough to the writer's attentive gaze at his body and intense feeling for his performance. Although Cinque was "addressing the audience," he ultimately "appealed" only to his Africans, who joined him "with a low guttural exclamation." The Africans, estranging their observers, affirmed their solidarity with this unintelligible sound. Not only does

the repetitive use of the word “now” emphasize the suddenness of Cinque’s movement, but it also hints at the writer’s futile effort to perpetuate the performing black body in the temporality of his spectatorship. The final remark encapsulates the writer’s feeling toward Cinque. In showing “the manner in which he knocked off the chains” and describing the revolt, presumably with his foreign tongue and gesture, Cinque appeared “almost terrific.”<sup>65)</sup> Cinque’s performance with his immeasurable bodily energy and expressions “almost terrified” the observers because they understood that Cinque could “knock off the chains” physically or conceptually restricting the black body again. Figuratively, through his expressive body, Cinque exceeded the abolitionist stage and performed beyond the observers’ spectatorial authority.

Cinque’s performative body escaped the net of the observers’ conflicting desires for the black body. To some observers, he and other Amistad Africans were the tangible evidence of African exoticism as if they were performers of a “freak show,” a genre which was popular in this period.<sup>66)</sup> To different observers and abolitionists, they

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65) According to *OED*, the word “terrific” referred to “causing terror, terrifying and excessive” until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century-unlike its modern definition, “superlatively good.” Def. A. *Oxford English Dictionary*. <http://www.oed.com.floyd.lib.umn.edu/view/Entry/199580?redirectedFrom=terrific#>.

66) According to Michael Chemers, exhibitions of physical abnormality and exotics have been “spectacles” on stage since the Enlightenment. Terms such as “normality,” “abnormality,” and “average” did not appear in European languages prior to the Enlightenment. It influenced the age of Jacksonian populism in the early nineteenth century U.S. Dime museums and freak shows emerged in this context. Both middle-class and under-class Americans enjoyed a variety of exhibitions and stagings such as magicians and human oddities (freakish or simply foreign). Staging the black body on both the abolitionist and minstrel stage was not unrelated to this fashion. See Chemers, *Staging Stigma* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 57-83.

stood for the victory of the revolutionary spirit for freedom over the bloody history of slave insurgencies. Above all, their contemporary Americans wanted to see them demonstrating black people's civic qualities in order to preserve social stability in white-black hierarchy. Most observers could hardly interpret the Amistad Africans' performance without investing the socially constructed images and meanings of the black race onto the Africans' bodies. Therefore, what the observers saw on the abolitionist stage is a reflection of their various desires for the black body as if the body was an open sign of racial signification. Their performance blatantly indicates that the Africans refused to display their bodies according to the representational taxonomies of the white and Protestant variety or as racist symbols. Instead, they transcended the ideological boundaries set by antebellum Americans, while performatively demonstrating their uncontrollable bodies. The abolitionist stage became a site where blackness was formed both by an (white) observer's desires for the black body and by the black performer's resistance to (white) spectatorship.

On Thursday, November 25 1841, the Amistad Africans with the chief missionary Rev. William Raymond and his family boarded the *Gentleman*, which was docked near New York City. In the middle of January the ship arrived at Freetown in Sierra Leone.<sup>67)</sup> Despite the lack of indisputable evidence, there was a rumor that Cinque, who

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67) The Amistad Africans sailed back to Sierra Leone with five missionaries--William and Elizabeth Raymond, Henry and Tamar Wilson, and James Steel--dispatched by the American Missionary Association. Osagie explores the history after their return to their home country by studying correspondences between these missionaries and Lewis Tappan. One letter tells that Cinque (Osagie calls him "Sengbe" or "Sengbe Pieh") emigrated from Sierra Leone to Jamaica later. See Osagie's chapter 3 "The Amistad Returnees and the Mende Mission," *Amistad*, 53-70.

was once a victim of the slave trade, became a trader himself after returning to his country.<sup>68)</sup> Having faced the Africans' betrayals and conflicts, Rev. Raymond in one letter confessed that he "scarcely knows what to write" about Cinque whom he had "a higher opinion" of than others when Cinque was under his instructions in the U.S.<sup>69)</sup> The irony in the Amistad hero's dramatic change illustrates performative blackness during the American antislavery movements. Cinque and other Africans did "perform" the themes of heroic achievement for humanity, "theatrically present" religious faith, and became "spectacles" in front of the observers. After all, behind the various images of the black body on the abolitionist stage, the Amistad Africans remain *unseen*.

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68) Martin, *Amistad*, 213, and Osagie, *Amistad*, 63.

69) *Liberator*, Aug. 5, 1842, 1.

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## Abstract

### **Amistad Africans on the Abolitionist Stage**

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Between the Amistad revolt in 1839 and their departure to the African home in 1841, the Amistad Africans became well known to their contemporary Americans in the vortex of the American antislavery movements. Abolitionists commonly exhibited ex-slaves at antislavery meetings to arouse the public's sentiments for enslaved blacks. To antebellum Americans in the North, the Amistad Africans on the abolitionist stage were also introduced as the living evidence of the black race's humanity that justified their right to freedom. In this theatrical setting of being seen by and seeing each other, while (white) observers tried to regulate the Africans' bodies by imposing white-Protestant values and racist images on them, the Africans disproved this regulation by performatively demonstrating their unruly black bodies. This theatrical reciprocity among abolitionists, observers, and the Amistad Africans illustrates how they dynamically attended the social construction of blackness in antebellum America. American abolitionists manufactured the political and cultural significances of the Africans to provide a model of the black man who would be a heroic revolutionary and a pious Christian. Regardless of the abolitionists' project on the Africans, observers did often not conceal their fear of slave insurrection and wanted to affirm their control over black people by demanding racial stereotypes in the Africans' performance. Slipping away from both the abolitionists' instructions and the observers' demands for particular performances, the Amistad Africans displayed their performative bodies that discouraged these Americans' attempts to inscribe them any ideological symbols.



**Key Words**

The Amistad revolt, American abolitionism, Performance, White spectatorship, Performative blackness